

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 71 (2017)

Heft: 4

Artikel: In the service of the Khans : elites in transition in Mongol Eurasia : introduction

Autor: Biran, Michal

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-737962>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 24.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

In the Service of the Khans: Elites in Transition in Mongol Eurasia

Michal Biran*

Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2017-0015>

Abstract: The Mongol empire (1206–1368) caused massive transformations in the composition and functioning of elites across Eurasia. While the Mongols themselves obviously became the new Eurasian elite, their small number as compared to the huge territory over which they ruled and their initial inexperience in administrating sedentary realms meant that many of their subjects also became part of the new multi-ethnic imperial elite. Mongol preferences, and the high level of mobility—both spatial and social—that accompanied Mongol conquests and rule, dramatically changed the characteristics of elites in both China and the Muslim world: While noble birth could be instrumental in improving one’s status, early surrender to Chinggis Khan; membership in the Mongol imperial guards (*keshig*); and especially, qualifications—such as excellence in warfare, administration, writing in Mongolian script or astronomy to name but a few—became the main ways to enter elite circles. The present volume translates and analyzes biographies of ten members of this new elite—from princes through generals, administrators, and vassal kings, to scientists and artists; including Mongols, Koreans, Chinese and Muslims—studied by researchers working at the project “Mobility, Empire and Cross Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia” at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The annotated biographies assembled here not only add new primary sources—translated from Chinese, Persian and Arabic—to the study of the Mongol Empire. They also provide important insights into the social history of the period, illuminating issues such as acculturation (of both the Mongols and their subjects), Islamization, family relations, ethnicity, imperial administration, and scientific exchange.

Keywords: Mongol Empire, elites, social history, mobility, acculturation

The Mongol empire (1206–1368) caused massive transformations in the composition and functioning of elites across Eurasia. While the Mongols themselves obviously became the new Eurasian elite, their small number as compared to the

*Corresponding author: Michal Biran, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel.
E-mail: biranm@mail.huji.ac.il

huge territory over which they ruled and their inexperience in administrating sedentary realms meant that many of their subjects also became part of the multi-ethnic imperial elite. Due to the Mongol preference for ruling through strangers, many of these new elite members were sent away from their homeland, to serve across the continent. The high level of mobility—both spatial and social—that accompanied the Mongol conquests, the consolidation of their empire, and later its collapse, constituted the first step towards robust cross-cultural exchanges in fields as varied as science, art, trade, military technology, and religion to name just a few. These in turn triggered massive ethnic, religious and geo-political transformations,¹ and also led to significant changes in the composition and identities of the Eurasian elites in China, the steppe and the Muslim world.

The present volume translates and analyzes biographies of ten members of this new elite—from princes through generals, administrators, and vassal kings, to scientists and artists; including Mongols, Chinese, Muslims and Koreans—who were active in Mongol Eurasia, from the time of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227) up to the mid-fourteenth century, when the Empire began to decline. The biographies assembled here, annotated by researchers working at the ERC-funded project “Mobility, Empire and Cross Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia”² at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, not only add new primary sources—translated from Chinese, Persian and Arabic—to the study of the Mongol Empire, but also provide important insights into the social history of a period unique in its rapid transformations.

The name of the volume echoes the title of *In the Service of the Khan*, published by Igor de Rachewiltz et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993). While the original book dealt with some of the main actors of the Mongol imperial enterprise, this volume deals with second- or third-tier elites, many of them hitherto ignored in the research literature. Enriched by the more than two decades of burgeoning scholarly literature on the Mongol Empire and a holistic Eurasian perspective, this volume enables us to dive deeper into the social history of the Mongol Empire, and opens new avenues for further research.

The elite figures discussed in this volume were multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, often serving as cultural brokers between their original culture (whether Mongol, Chinese, Korean or Muslim) and the Imperial Mongol one, and sometimes between other cultures within the Empire’s realm and beyond as well. This was

¹ Biran 2015; Allsen 2015.

² For the project see <http://mongol.huji.ac.il/>.

also a mobile elite, moving—sometimes over huge distances— according to the Empire’s military, administrative, and cultural needs, or to improve one’s political or economic position. The discussed individuals display various mobility patterns typical of the Mongol period. These include military deployment, namely moving in conformity with imperial campaigns; military defection; bureaucratic appointments; diplomatic embassies, that could lead to long sojourns—either forced or voluntary—in the receiving country; transfer—whether of experts (e. g., artisans and astronomers, either in groups or individually) sent to work for the Empire and its courts or to the *keshig* (guard); obligatory visits to the Mongol capital as part of the requirements of local vassal rulers; as well as labor migration, inside or outside the Empire’s realm. As for social mobility, although none of the mentioned individuals arose from an entirely humble background, their success in the ranks of the Imperial elite was more often connected to their skills and connections with the Chinggisids than to the status of their original family.

Elite position was often hereditary, and thus most chapters discuss several generations of one family. Yet there can be a certain difference within the careers of various generations of the same family.³ While noble birth could be instrumental in maintaining one’s elite status, the major channels for entering the elite of the Mongol Empire were membership—often forced—in the various Mongol *keshigs* (imperial guards), that formed the nursery of the (often overlapping) military and civil elite, both Mongol and non-Mongol; early submission to the Mongols, especially to Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227)—either collectively as a tribe or city, or individually; and particularly qualifications—such as excellence in warfare, administration, writing in Mongolian script, astronomy, music or other fields appreciated by the Mongols.⁴

Another common feature of the discussed individuals is their personal connections with the Mongol rulers or the Imperial family, Imperial women often playing a decisive role in patronage or dismissal. The importance of such patrimonial connections was apparent even in the seemingly bureaucratic Yuan administration, and certainly in the less formal Muslim world. Therefore, positions that imply close personal connections with the Chinggisids, such as cooks,⁵ were often a springboard to key offices in the imperial administration. The importance

³ Thus, for example, among the al-Tayyārīs discussed in Amir’s article, we find that the father was a physician and religious scholar, while his son was a musician and calligrapher. Another example is Temüder, the Mongol administrator discussed by Cho, who came from a family of generals.

⁴ The usual channel to elite membership in China—passing the Imperial examinations—either did not exist in the Yuan dynasty or was rather marginal even after the reintroduction of the examinations in 1313.

⁵ See the articles of Humble and Cho in this volume.

of the personal connection also made the elite highly vulnerable to political upheavals: a wrong choice in a succession struggle or a severing of the relations with the Mongol rulers due to other reasons, could easily eradicate social capital acquired through several generations and result in an individual's or a family's banishment from elite circles, or even total annihilation.⁶ The various persons discussed in this volume represent several segments of the Imperial elites: first, the Chinggisids—members of the ruling family and originally the Empire's top political, military and social elites. Even amongst them there were various strata, and, especially after 1260, the ruling khans in each Mongol polity tried to limit the power of family members, concentrating more power within the dominant lineage—that of Jingim's descendants in Yuan China, Abaqa's offspring in Iran, Du'a's progeny in the Chaghadaid Khanate and Batu's descendants in the Golden Horde. Moreover, as Shurany demonstrates, the originally extensive powers of the Imperial princes were gradually curtailed by the ruling khans, who restricted their realm and authority by giving more administrative responsibilities to officials appointed by the central government. In extreme cases, Imperial descendants descended into poverty, as exemplified in post-Ilkhanid Iran when Chinggisids of lesser branches, sought after to take up the Chinggisid crown after the extinction of the Hülegüid line, were found among weavers and shepherds.⁷

Another important segment of the elite was the imperial sons-in law, discussed by Landa and Choi. These comprised two different groups: first, tribal leaders who played a prominent role in the military elite; and second, local rulers, whose realms were governed indirectly by the Mongols. While Chinggis Khan's initial reforms indeed broke up significant parts of Mongolia's tribal organization, replacing tribal solidarity by loyalty to the soldier's military unit, its leader and the Chinggisid family, recent research highlights the continuous importance of tribal identity: Tribes that submitted early and peacefully, like the Oyrads, were often allowed to retain a considerable number of their tribal troops under indigenous leadership. Such tribal forces were an important segment of the Mongols' armies. Their leaders who, more often than not, were not included in the *keshig*, were connected to the Golden (i. e., Imperial) family through marriage alliances.⁸ However, even in this segment of the military elite, connection to specific Chinggisids was often a stronger component of identity than tribal solidarity. Thus, as Landa shows, we find different lineages of the same tribe acting independently and referred to as separate bodies by the Mongols, thereby suggesting the lineage as a future frame of reference for dissecting Mongol society.

⁶ See Shurany's article in this volume.

⁷ Melville 1999.

⁸ Landa 2016.

The non-Mongol sons-in laws are discussed by Choi through the case study of the Korean King Ch'ungsön (1275–1325). Such in-laws— and/or their descendants—often grew up in the Mongol *keshigs*, where they were immersed in Imperial culture. They received Mongol names, titles and of course wives, and were supposed later to rule their realms, to which they were sent with officials from the khan's government, in a Mongol way. The reality, at least in the case of this specific king, was more complicated, and involved abdication for remaining close to the political center in Dadu as well as the use of Buddhism for evading political struggles.

Other Mongol elites included generals, such as Uriangqadai, son of the famous general Sübe'edei and a product of the *keshig*, whose career demonstrates the importance of the generals as Khan makers, as well as Mongol ability to shift from steppe warfare to naval one, as well as administrators, like Temüder. While the presence of the Mongols in administrative positions demonstrates their acculturation into the conquered societies, Mongols who had reached the administration's apex, and tried to limit the privileges of the indigenous elites, were often portrayed as “bad ministers” by local historians. This was true not only in Temüder's case but also in that of Aruq (d. 1289), who under Ilkhan Arghun (r. 1284–1291) served as Baghdad's *ṣāhib al-dīwān* (chief financial officer), a post usually held by *Tajiks* (i. e., Iranian or Arab Muslims).⁹

Another elite group was composed of local notables who took part in their homeland's administration, like Şadr al-Dīn Tabrīzī discussed by Zakrzewski. While they did not reach the level of the in-laws, their obligatory visits to Mongolia and their work with Mongol personnel made them cultural brokers in their own lands, often side by side with patronage of their realm's indigenous culture. While their main sphere of activity was finance and administration, they—like most other imperial administrators—also fought in the Mongol ranks when need arose.

Another important group of local notables in the Chinese realm were the “Honorary Mongols,” discussed by Humble and Houdos. These Han Chinese, who had grown up in the Mongols' *keshigs* or courts, received Mongolian names, titles and wives and entered the Mongol administration and army. Serving as cultural brokers, these Mongolised Chinese often simultaneously retained facets of their Han identity (e. g. Confucian norms). While elite “Mongolisation” was also apparent in the Muslim world,¹⁰ conferring Mongolian names and wives upon members of Iranian elites was far less common, or at least far less recorded.

⁹ For Aruq see Biran forthcoming.

¹⁰ See e. g. Lane 2015.

The last segment of the elite included in this volume is the “knowledge elite,” or experts, discussed by Yang and Amir. The members of this group were often polymaths—astronomer, geographer and weaver in the case of Jamāl al-Dīn; musician and calligrapher (a common combination) in al-Tayyārī’s—and highly mobile, frequently sent from one Mongol court to another or migrating among polities, confident of their ability to find lucrative jobs. Their skills—usually more civil than military—often made them close companions of the Khans. Yang demonstrates the complex relationship between “foreign” and Chinese experts at the Yuan court, highlighting the alliance of the Muslim Jamāl al-Dīn and his Nestorian colleague ʿĪsā against the indigenous Chinese scholars. While in China cooperation with the Mongols was sometimes held against these experts (e. g. the case of the painter Zhao Mengfu, a scion of the Song royal house, who was not included among the four Yuan master painters due to his illustrious career in the Mongol administration),¹¹ such cooperation was far less problematic in the Muslim world even before Mongol Islamization.

While the figures included here do not represent all the segments of the imperial elite, they demonstrate the variety and richness of information on social history and cross-cultural contacts under Mongol rule that still awaits much study, and suggest fruitful channels of comparison between Eastern and Western Asia. Moreover, starting from the life stories of specific individuals, the chapters shed light on issues such as acculturation (of both the Mongols and their subjects), court culture, conversion to Islam, family relations, ethnicity, imperial administration, scientific exchange, and—especially in the Chinese realm—historiographical issues. The biographies manifest the fluidity of identities—ethnic, religious, tribal—of the mobile Imperial elite, and can significantly enrich any general discussion of the social and cultural transformations that occurred under Mongol rule in China, the steppe, and the Muslim world. It is hoped this volume will stimulate additional nuanced studies of the Imperial elite of Mongol Eurasia in particular, and of this fascinating period and the transformations it engendered in general.

Funding: The research leading to this publication has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013)/ERC Grant Agreement n. 312397.

¹¹ McCausland 2011.

References

- Allsen, Thomas T (2015): "Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia". In: *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*. Edited by Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 119–151.
- Biran, Michal (2015): "The Mongol Empire and Inter-Civilizational Exchange". In: *The Cambridge World History: Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE-1500 CE*, Vol. 5. Edited by Benjamin Z. Kedar and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 534–558.
- Biran, Michal (forthcoming): "Baghdad under Mongol Rule (565-736/1258-1335): Between History and Memory". In: *Handbook of Baghdad*. Edited by Jens Scheiner and Isabel Toral-Niehoff.
- Landa, Ishayahu (2016): "Imperial Sons-In-Law on the Move: Oyirad and Qonggirad Dispersion in Mongol Eurasia". *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 22: 161–198.
- Lane, George (2015): "Persian Notables and the Families that Underpinned the Ilkhanate". In: *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*. Edited by Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 182–213.
- McCausland, Shane (2011): *Zhao Mengfu: Calligraphy and Painting for Khubilai's China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Melville, Charles (1999): *The Fall of Amir Chupan and the Decline of the Ilkhanate, 1327-37: A Decade of Discord in Mongol Iran (Papers on Inner Asia, No. 30)*. Bloomington, Indiana: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies.