Introduction

Knowing the history of the Mongol Empire is central to understanding both the medieval and modern worlds, yet this history is frequently unfamiliar to more than a handful of specialists and aficionados. Furthermore, two phenomena have guaranteed that our view is dominated by men. First is the captivating personage of Chinggis Khan himself, who has become a household name worldwide and an unparalleled icon in popular culture, even though the actual man and his character are surprisingly difficult to know. Second are the Mongol military campaigns throughout Eurasia, which on the surface appear to have been largely conducted and accomplished by men. But one leader's charisma and the riveting actions of his warriors do not give us anything close to the whole picture. Rather, women played critical roles both in Chinggis Khan's life and in the development of the Mongol Empire. Although scholars have known and written on this for years, the story is larger than one might think, and has not yet been fully told.

This book seeks to fill the gap in our understanding by answering two questions: Where do women fit into the story of Chinggis Khan, the Mongol Empire, and the Mongol conquests? And how exactly did these women contribute to the development of that empire? It examines the lives and careers of particular women at the pinnacle of Mongol society, among them Chinggis Khan's mother, Hö'elün, and his senior wife, Börte, as well as three imperial widows who made a mark on succession to the grand khanate in the 1240s and 1250s: Töregene, Oghul-Qaimish, and Sorqoqtani. It describes overlapping categories of elite women: senior and junior wives, senior and junior princesses, daughters-in-law from

illustrious consort houses, daughters-in-law from vanquished families. Then it situates them all in their proper places in Mongol history.

As this book will make clear, the roles that women played in the birth and expansion of the Mongol Empire were varied, yet always essential. Some roles were logistical: women managed the nomadic camps with their inhabitants, gear, and flocks; the biannual migrations between summer and winter camping sites; and irregular traveling camp movement during military campaigns. In the imperial case, senior wives ran camps with the assistance of servants and staff, while junior wives and concubines lived and worked under their seniors' supervision. Once the empire began to form, these staffs grew to hundreds or thousands of people, and imperial women began to cooperate with the imperial bodyguards, whose task was to safeguard them, the ruler, and their encampments, which formed the heart of a traveling city. Women's control of these establishments both when men were home, and when men went to war, was essential to the Mongol ability to field such extraordinary armies. That is to say, women's dominance on the "home front" is what enabled Mongol men to specialize in war, and to muster a larger percentage of men as warriors than any other contemporary society.

At the same time, women were key to the nomadic economy: they engaged regularly in trade both with their own property and with that of their husbands and children. During war they enjoyed portions of spoils, while during peace they acquired interests in tax revenues. Thus the highly placed women this book examines controlled significant human, animal, and material resources, and deployed them as well or as ill as their own training and savvy permitted.

Women were also critical to politics. First, select women made carefully chosen marriages with important political and military leaders, as when the five daughters of Chinggis Khan and Börte wedded their father's allies during the empire's expansion. These marriages brought political, military, and economic benefits to everyone involved. In later generations, strategic marriages between the Chinggisids and particular consort houses conferred similar benefits on Chinggis Khan and Börte's descendants. Women also acted as political advisors to men – their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons – and also to one another. Women attended, participated in, and supported persons and policies at nomadic assemblies (*quriltai*s). They engaged in diplomacy, both in cooperation with men and on their own. They interacted with military commanders and bureaucrats, patronized religions as they chose, and functioned as channels of intercession

with men for petitioners. Some took up leadership after their husbands' deaths: the most openly active women in Mongol politics were widows. Moreover, women were central to succession even in this patriarchal society: when Chinggisid princes had children, it was the status of the mother and the father together that determined the likely trajectory of each child's life. To put it another way: the question in succession was not merely who was a child's father, but, rather, who was the mother?

It is also through women that we catch a glimpse of the losers in Chinggis Khan's wars, that is, the dispossessed peoples whose subjugation fueled the empire's extraordinary expansion. The memory of these lost peoples lived on in the secondary wives that Chinggis Khan acquired, all of whom were literally trophies of his success, and some of whom struggled to preserve what remained of their past and their people. Later marriages between Chinggis Khan's descendants and royal houses in Korea, Georgia, Seljuk and Byzantine Anatolia, Muscovy, Fars, and Kirman similarly demonstrated a map of vassalage, tribute and subjection, which could be sealed either by the dynamic presence of a Chinggisid princess at the vassal court, or the relocation of a vassal princess to the Mongol court.

THE BACKGROUND

Life on the steppe in the 1160s was cold, lawless, and politically unstable.[1] Steppe society was composed primarily of Turkish- or Mongolian-speaking horse- and sheep-herding nomads, although other animals were also in evidence (goats, Bactrian camels, cattle). This society was divided among groups of people who shared a common name and connections to a real or mythical ancestor, like the Merkits, Naimans, and Mongols themselves. Society was hierarchical, as seen in the existence of ruling lineages and subject peoples within each group. Nevertheless, internal structures could vary significantly, so that some groups boasted multiple ruling lineages and consequently a more egalitarian, consensus-driven ruling cadre, like the Qonggirats in eastern Mongolia. Others possessed few or only one ruling lineage, with the accompanying centralizing tendencies that that implied, like the Kereits or the Naimans to the

[1] Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Thomas Nivison Haining (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 103.

Mongols' south and west.[2] Religion in this society was a patchwork of shamanistic practices side-by-side with Nestorian Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam.

Among the major players on the steppe at the time of Chinggis Khan's rise were the large, wealthy, and sophisticated Turkic polities of the Naimans and the Kereits, the settled Uighurs in the Tarim river basin and the Taklamakan desert, and the Öng'üts near the border of the Jin Empire in Northern China. Mongolian speakers included the wealthy yet politically disunited Tatars to the east of the Mongols, the Merkits east of Lake Baikal, and the Qonggirats close to the Öng'üts, to name only a few of the larger groups. The Mongols themselves in this period were without leadership and were poor: the last and least of their neighbors.

The birth of Temüjin (later Chinggis Khan) in the 1160s occurred against a backdrop of societal instability and disorder in general, and lawlessness and division within his own people in particular. Although his father, Yisügei, was a war leader from a ruling lineage, the family does not appear to have been wealthy, and in any case Yisügei's death when Temüjin was still young plunged Yisügei's widow, Hö'elün, and her children into a period of troubles. Over time Temüjin overcame these setbacks to rise on the steppe as a promising leader, but then suffered serious defeat at the battle of Dalan Balzhut in 1187 and disappeared for nearly 10 years. When he returned to the steppe in 1196 from Northern China leading an army for the Jin emperor, he began a second, more successful rise. By 1206 he had either destroyed or subsumed most of his Turkic and Mongolian neighbors, and was raised at a quriltai to the position of Chinggis Khan. After a pause to reorganize his military, and through it the rest of steppe society, Chinggis Khan set out on what became his world-famous campaigns: one against the Tangut Kingdom of Xi-Xia (1209–10), another against the Jin Empire in northern China (1211–15, with continuations in 1217–23, 1230–34), a third into the Khwarazm-Shah Empire in the Islamic lands to the west (1218–23), and a second campaign against the Tanguts in 1226–27, during which Chinggis Khan died.[3] At some point before or during these gigantic enterprises he acquired the ideology that helped fuel them and the later expansion of the

[2] Isenbike Togan, *Flexibility and Limitation in Steppe Formation: The Kereit Khanate and Chinggis Khan* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 124–127.

[3] For his biography see Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*; Ruth Dunnell, *Chinggis Khan: World Conqueror* (Boston: Longman, 2010); Michal Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, Makers of the Muslim World Series (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

empire: namely, that the overarching spirit of the Sky, the Enduring Blue Sky (*Gök Mönggke Tenggeri*) had commanded him to conquer the entire world, both steppe and settled.[4] After Chinggis Khan's death, his family used this ideology to continue his conquests through a multiyear invasion of Central Asia, Russia, the Caucasus, and eastern Europe in 1236–42; campaigns in southern China in the 1250s and again thereafter until 1279; and a second and final campaign into Iran, Iraq, and Anatolia (1253–60), among many, smaller ventures. While these campaigns were going on, the empire was also rocked by a series of contentious succession struggles in the 1240s and 1250s, which led eventually to the Mongol Civil War of 1260–64 and the political disintegration of the United Empire into multiple, warring successor states.

THE SCOPE

The majority of this book covers the period between the 1160s, when Chinggis Khan's mother Hö'elün was first kidnapped by and married to his father; through the establishment of the United Mongol Empire from the twelve-teens to 1230s; to the arrest and execution in the 1250s of the widow and regent, Oghul-Qaimish, by Chinggis Khan's grandson, the Grand Khan Möngke, less than a decade before the Mongol Civil War (1260–64) broke the empire apart. The final section addresses women and their activities in the successor khanates that emerged before and after the civil war, ending with a case study of women in politics in the Ilkhanate in Iran until the 1330s.

Because what we can glean from the historical sources varies tremendously, the chapters are far from uniform. Some follow the lives of individuals as they made their personal marks on the empire. Others describe larger systems of labor, marriage, the military, or politics in order to draw out trends within nomadic society that were propelled by women's behavior. Our story begins in Chapter 1 with an overview of the systems in which nomadic women operated. First was marriage, whether sanctioned or unsanctioned; levirate marriage (when a widow wedded her husband's junior kin after his death); and the question of seniority among wives. Next came women's labor as they managed their camps, and their economic roles as they controlled resources and interacted with merchants. Women's work also meant bearing children and bringing

[4] Anne F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6–10 with notes.

them up to understand the cultural intricacies and necessary hierarchies of nomadic society. Women then helped make strategic marriages for their children with other families, especially their own natal kin. Other important systems to which women contributed were politics, and, in ruling circles, succession. A last topic is women's loyalty – where it was assumed to go, and where it might actually lie, especially in the case of women who had been brought into a family by force.

With these major themes in place, we turn to the first two individual women to shape the empire: Chinggis Khan's mother, Hö'elün, and his senior wife, Börte. In Chapter 2 we examine not only the eventful specifics of their lives, but also the ways in which they represented larger systems of marriage, labor, and war. Then, since both women were tied inextricably to Chinggis Khan's rising star and the realities of triumph, we turn in Chapter 3 to Chinggis Khan's other women – his secondary wives – who only joined his family and empire after his conquest of their own families and peoples, and whose lives were therefore inexorably shaped by defeat. In their stories we see the profound effects of conquest on women, men, and populations, and the different ways that subjugation limited women's opportunities. We also catch a glimpse of the complexity of women's loyalties, and the effect these loyalties could have on women's behavior after their capture.

The next stories that emerged as the empire grew were those of systems and women's places in them, especially the military. Chapters 4 and 5 feature many women, chief among them the five daughters of Börte and Chinggis Khan, along with some of Chinggis Khan's daughters from lesser wives. The systems included Chinggis Khan's armies, the reorganization of which was far more closely tied to these princesses and their husbands than has previously been imagined. Chapter 4 also addresses the relationships between imperial wives and the imperial guard, as well as the hitherto unacknowledged influence of individual women on Chinggisid succession. In Chapter 5 we look at the gigantic project of the Mongol conquests, in which – contrary to general understanding – men and women participated together. Our focus here includes the individual contributions made by imperial sons-in-law and their princess wives to specific military campaigns.

After Chinggis Khan's death in 1227, and with the first round of conquests achieved by 1334, the narrative returns to the exploits of individuals. The late 1240s and early 1250s were the age of imperial widows, and were dominated by three: Töregene, widow of Grand Khan

Ögedei (r. 1229–41); Oghul-Qaimish, widow of Töregene's son, Grand Khan Güyük (r. 1246–48); and Sorqoqtani, widow of Chinggis Khan's son Tolui and mother of the Grand Khan who overthrew Güyük's descendants, Möngke (r. 1251–59). All three women have been inaccurately presented by historical sources that were eager to fit them into clear-cut molds of worthy and unworthy feminine behavior. We begin with Töregene in Chapter 6 and explore her high ambitions and correspondingly extraordinary accomplishments as she worked as regent after her husband's death, the challenges she faced from enemies and detractors as she sought to enthrone her unpopular son, the profound effect she had on the history of the empire, and the heavy toll all of this took on her health. Next we move to Oghul-Qaimish and Sorqoqtani in Chapter 7, who found themselves set in opposition to each other. In the deadly game that followed, Oghul-Qaimish lost and took her family down with her, while Sorqoqtani won and set her own son on the throne, but in victory badly damaged the empire itself.

The final section charts women's activities in the successor khanates that became independent states after the Mongol Civil War of the 1260s. Here in Chapter 8 we return to systems, this time systems of lineage, marriage, inheritance, and politics, which were populated by many women from many families. Important consort lineages star here, especially the Qonggirats, Oirats, and Kereits, and their connections to Börte's daughters are made clear – or not, in the case of the Kereit family, which was unrelated to any Chinggisid princess, and was therefore unique. This section concludes in Chapter 9 with a case study of women, politics, and consort families in the Ilkhanate in Iran, where the relatively plentiful evidence allows us to see patterns and make connections that are impossible for other regions.

This book is best understood as a contribution to an ongoing discussion – a building block in our construction of the many ways in which women shaped the history of the Mongol Empire. As all scholars drawn into the Mongols' fierce gravity know, the multiplicity of languages, scholarly literatures, and tricky historical sources present extreme technical challenges to all of us, which makes uncovering Mongol history into a cooperative venture by necessity, far more than is the case in, say, the history of sixteenth-century France. Thus although this book uses as many sources in as many languages or translations as were available, it does not claim to have included every single one known to the world. It also focuses exclusively on the stories of the elite, not ordinary subjects,

since that is what the sources preferred to describe. Finally, this book does not aim to represent a definitive study of everything written on women in the Mongol Empire in all languages, and in no way dictates a final word on the subject. Rather, it is designed to inspire further discussion of this critical topic, in order to help us all better understand the extraordinary phenomenon of the Mongol Empire and the women who helped build it.

1

Women in Steppe Society

To date, scholarly and popular histories of the Mongols have been dominated by the seemingly masculine topic of Mongol warfare, which makes it easy to suspect that steppe women enjoyed little political, social, or economic power. Furthermore, Mongol society before Chinggis Khan's rise was not only impoverished but also tremendously unsettled, so that nomadic women were vulnerable to aggression, violence, and rape. This may especially have been the case among rank-and-file nomadic subjects, among whom harsh circumstances might weigh more heavily on women and girls than on men and boys.[1] Nevertheless, despite the dangers inherent in their society, many nomadic women enjoyed control and exerted influence in a wide range of arenas. As for women at the pinnacle of steppe society, such as the Chinggisids, the picture is one of wealth, responsibility and tremendous opportunity for those with intelligence and talent.

It is only possible to appreciate the authority that some women enjoyed and the contributions they made to Mongol history if we understand the general situation of women on the steppe. To do this, we must examine their lives in detail. We begin with marriage, since women's most

[1] Ratchnevsky notes the infanticide of girls, selling children in hard times, or making restoration for crime by giving girls to the aggrieved. Paul Ratchnevsky, "La condition de la Femme mongole au 12e/13e siècle," in *Tractata Altaica: Denis Sinor, sexagenario optime de rebus altaicis merito dedicata*, ed. W. Heissig et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz), 522. Aubin agrees on recompensing murder with a girl, but she argues that infanticide was rare, and took place primarily in areas influenced by Chinese traditions. Françoise Aubin, "Le statut de l'enfant dans la société mongole," *Recueils de la société Jean Bodin pour l'histoire comparative des institutions* 35 (1975): 482–3, 492.

extensive powers tended to appear after marriage through their status as wives, mothers, or widows. Next comes women's work, since they engaged all day long in a wide range of activities, which required the formation and maintenance of many complex relationships. Along with work, we must investigate women's economic opportunities, since their daily business included the management, control, and exploitation of animal, human, and other resources. An additional area of women's activity centered on hospitality and religious duties. Women also had a profound influence on the family: in the immediate sphere, they managed the upbringing of children with the help of others, while on a larger front, women were essential to the question of succession and inheritance, since a woman's own status shaped the options open to her children. Women also figured in politics in many ways, including as advisors to others, as political actors themselves, or as the critical links that joined allied families, among other roles. Finally, women's private, interior lives came to affect the empire in surprising ways, especially those conquered women brought into the Chinggisid house by force, whose loyalty to that house was never questioned, but perhaps should have been.

It is also necessary to remember that all women's lives were governed by status. Steppe society remained generally hierarchical in nature for women and men, even after Chinggis Khan upended existing social hierarchies to create a new, merit-based social and military system. We cannot understand the activities of women, and from them learn about their relationships and their control of resources, without locating these women in a hierarchy of rank of which nomads themselves were exquisitely aware.

BRIDE PRICE, LEVIRATE, AND SENIORITY AMONG WIVES

Although the Mongols were a polygynous people, wealth strongly shaped marriage, since rich men wedded more wives than poor ones.[2] One reason was that Mongol grooms paid a bride price to compensate a prospective

[2] Ratchnevsky sees no limitation in wives, but does not account for social class. Ratchnevsky, "La Femme," 514. Holmgren sees unlimited wives only for wealthy men, otherwise one or two. Jennifer Holmgren, "Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices in Early Mongol and Yüan Society, with Particular Reference to the Levirate," *Journal of Asian History* 16, rprt. in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China* (London: Variorum, 1995), 147; similarly Morris Rossabi, "Khubilai Khan and the Women in His Family," in *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner), 155.