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REVIEW OF

**Denise Aigle. *The Mongol Empire between myth
and reality: studies in anthropological history***

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REVIEWS

Denise Aigle. *The Mongol Empire between myth and reality: studies in anthropological history.* Leiden: Brill, 2014. 393 pp. Maps, genealogical tables, illustrations. ISBN 978 90 04 27749 6.

This collection of articles by the eminent French scholar Denise Aigle is an important addition to the burgeoning literature about the Mongols in the Islamic world. Aigle follows “the cultural turn” in studies of the Mongol Empire, initiated by the late Thomas T. Allsen (1940-2019), that stresses the role of the Mongols as promoters of cultural exchanges across Eurasia rather than mere destroyers of civilizations. Aigle focuses on the Ilkhanate (1260-1335), the Mongol state centered in Iran established by Chinggis Khan’s grandson Hülegü, studying its relations with the Latin West and the Mamlūk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria, but mainly the multifaceted interactions between Muslims (and Christians) in the Ilkhanate and their Mongol rulers. Aigle explores the ways in which Muslim authors tried to make sense of the Mongols’ political culture and religious beliefs and integrate them into a Muslim framework as well as how Ilkhanid historians, Muslims and Christians, narrated the Mongol past and used it for Ilkhanid legitimacy.

The book includes thirteen articles, divided to four sections, as well as an introduction and an epilogue. While most chapters originated in articles published between 2000-2011, mostly in French, they have been revised, updated and whenever necessary translated to English, to be included in this volume. Many of the chapters are based on a close comparison between various, often multi-lingual, sources and a penetrating analysis of Mongol diplomatic letters. They also draw special attention to historiographical questions.

The first part (“The memoria of the Mongols in historical and literary sources”) highlights the integration of the Mongols in the writings of both Muslims and Christians inside and outside the empire. It starts with a discussion of the mythization of figures such as Saladin, Chinggis Khan and the Mamlūk Sultan Baybars (r. 1260-1277) in historiography and popular

literature in both the Muslim East and the Latin West. The second article explores the Mongol context of the legend of Prester John. The figure of the imaginary Christian king, who was supposed to come to the help of his co-religionists in Palestine against the Muslims, originated in the pre-Mongol period (with the Buddhist Qara Khiṭāy defeating the Muslim Seljuqs in 1141). By the time of the Mongol conquest, this tradition prevails in Europe and the Middle East, so that for a short time Chinggis Khan (after he had defeated the Muslim Khwārazm Shāh), was identified as Prester John, and soon afterwards Latin emissaries sent to the Mongols were looking for him and his heirs. Skillfully moving between Latin, Persian, and Mongolian sources, Aigle follows Prester John's transformation from hero to villain, who had fought with Chinggis Khan and lost, and identifies among Chinggis Khan's rivals two Nestorian Mongol chiefs, whose biographies served as a basis for this new version of the Prester John legend.

Another important article deals with the historical works of the Jacobite Bishop Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), a polymath who lived in the Ilkhanate, and wrote histories in Syriac and Arabic. Closely comparing his two chronicles, Aigle explores significant differences: Bar Hebraeus' Arabic history hardly gives information on Christian affairs, upon which the Syriac chronicle elaborates, and omits most of Bar Hebraeus' personal remarks. On the other hand, it contains more information on political affairs and preserves the full diplomatic correspondence between the Ilkhanid and the Mamlūks, which is barely mentioned in the Syriac version. Obviously each work addressed a different audience and created a different image of the Mongols. The last and most original chapter in this section tackles the use of *taqwīm*, a text composed in graphical form which combines genealogical tables, narrative text, and tables, in the historical sources of the Muslim East. The form developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and continued under the Timurids and Ottomans, perhaps reflecting a pattern originating in scientific works.

The second part ("Shamanism and Islam") opens with an insightful summary on Shamanism and Islam in Central Asia from the Turkic period to the present day, in which Aigle deftly uses the ample French anthropological works on Mongolia and Central Asia, and highlights the role of animals in the religious life of Central Asia, as well as the Islamization of various Shamanic

elements in Islamic Central Asia. A second impressive article examines how the myth of origin of Chinggis Khan which derived from the Shamanic context of *The secret history*, the only contemporary Mongol source for the rise of Chinggis Khan, was transformed with the Islamization of the Mongols and further in the Timurid and Moghul contexts. She shows how these Muslim dynasties embellished the original Shamanic myth with monotheistic elements (including a genealogical connection to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib) and continued to use it for legitimation purposes. The third chapter in this section, “Mongol law versus Islamic law: myth and reality”, discusses the relationship between the *Yasa* (*Jasaq*, the law code ascribed to Chinggis Khan) and the Muslim *sharī‘a*. Aigle reviews the existing literature on the subject from the eighteenth century onwards (she misses, however, the important article of de Rachewiltz¹). She analyzes the connection of the *Yasa* to other Mongol institutions (the army, the *yarghu*, the Mongol court) and religious concepts, and differentiates between the *Yasa* (state law) and *Yosun* (customary laws), that were based on Shamanic worldview. She argues that the Muslim sources which presented the *Yasa* as opposed to Muslim law usually confused the *Yosun* (that were opposed to the *sharī‘a* but not enforced on the Muslims) with the *Yasa*, and that the conflict between the Mongol and Muslim law systems was marginal at best under Ilkhanid rule. This conflict, however, was highlighted in the Mamlūk realm, especially in the fifteenth century when the Mamlūks were threatened by Tamerlane (r. 1370-1405), a Turco-Mongol Muslim ruler adhering to aspects of the *Yasa*.

Part three (“Conquering the world protected by the Tengerri”) includes two articles dealing mainly with diplomacy and analyzing Mongol diplomatic letters to the Latin West and the Ayyūbīs respectively. The first highlights the multilingualism of Mongol letters to the west and the resulting translation issues; the difference between the letters of the United Empire (1206-60) that were mainly ultimatums, and Ilkhanid correspondence that aspired to create military and political alliances with the west. Aigle stresses the Mongols’ belief that they were protected by Heaven and representing its will upon Earth and their understanding of peace as equaling full submission. Such concepts, as well as mutual suspicion and the clash of two universal worldviews, Mongol and Christian, led to the failure of Ilkhanid diplomatic

¹ Igor de Rachewiltz, “Some reflections on Činggis Qan’s *jasay*,” *East Asian History* 6 (1993): 91-103.

efforts to establish Mongol-European cooperation against the Mamlūks. Unlike the situation in the Latin west, in the case of Hülegü's letters to the Ayyūbīs discussed in the second article, we do not have the original documents only their citations in various Muslim sources. Aigle found eleven sources that cite these letters from the 1250s, ranging from the late-thirteenth century to the seventeenth, and analyzed them as representing five lines of transmissions, among Arabic and Persian sources. She concludes that the version transmitted in Bar Hebraeus' Arabic work and in several Persian Islamic sources (what she defines as "the authoritative model") was most closely representing Mongol political ideology, and indeed became a model for later Ilkhanid and even Timurid diplomacy.

The fourth and last part "Mamlūks and Ilkhans: the quest of legitimacy," again combines questions of history, historiography and memory, centering on the Mamlūk sultan Baybars and the Ilkhan Ghāzān (r. 1295-1304). The first two chapters in this section deal with Baybars. The first ("Legitimizing a low-born, regicide monarch. Baybars and the Ilkhans") focuses on the attempts of the Mamlūk Sultan Baybars, to legitimize its rule, despite his usurpation, the killing of his predecessors and his lack of a known, let alone prestigious, lineage, so important to his Ilkhanid rivals. Aigle analyses Baybars' actions and the statements of his biographers, showing how he established himself as an exemplary Islamic ruler, and a tool of God. Baybars did it by appointing an 'Abbāsī scion as a new Caliph, now based in Cairo under Mamlūk aegis; by highlighting the victory on 'Ayn Jālūt against the Mongols (actually won by Quṭuz [r. 1260], whom Baybars later murdered), and connecting it to Qur'ānic allusions of the struggle between David (Baybars) and Goliath (the Mongols). He manifested his personal piety by performing the *ḥajj*, linking himself to former Islamic conquerors, and building monuments and inscriptions praising his victories against the Franks or the Mongols, thereby creating a new sacred topography in Bilād al-Shām (Greater Syria). Baybars presented himself as *jihād* warrior and gave eschatological meaning to his victories. He also used the titles "Alexander of his time" and "Lord of the auspicious conjunction," both ascribed to Chinggis Khan and his heirs in the Ilkhanid realm. Indeed both the stress on functioning as God's representative on earth and the use of these titles strongly suggest that simultaneously with stressing his Islamic credentials,

Baybars was also imitating Ilkhanid legitimation tactics, or at least those that (unlike impressive progeny) he could emulate. The second article focuses on one facet of Baybars' legitimizing tactics, the Caliphal investiture ceremonies that he initiated, analyzing the Caliph's investiture diploma to the Sultan and the rituals accompanying the coronations of both Caliph and Sultan in Cairo. The next two chapters deal with Ghāzān, the Ilkhan whose conversion made Islam the state religion of the Ilkhanate, and more precisely in the religious aspects of Ghāzān's invasion to Mamlūk Syria in 1299-1303, which included the only Ilkhanid victory in the long Mamlūk Ilkhanid war. Chapter Twelve analyzes Ghāzān's *amān* (safe conduct agreement) given to the residents of Damascus in 1299 and the letters he exchanged with the Mamlūk Sultan in 1301. It manifests how the two rulers competed in presenting themselves as ideal Muslim rulers while questioning the Islamic credentials of their counterparts, using Qur'ānic citations and claiming to establish pious Muslim government. One of the Mamlūks' claims against Ghāzān's sincere Islamization was his close cooperation with Christians of various types: those who took part in his troops as well as the local residents to whom he had promised defense. Aigle concludes that Ghāzān's Islamization did not fundamentally changed the diplomatic language of the Mongols who still saw themselves as God's punishment and equaled peace with submission. The last chapter deals with the most famous religious response to the same Ilkhanid invasions, the three anti-Mongol fatwas of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), famous for their popularity among contemporary Muslim extremists. The famous Ḥanbalī jurist who as a child had escaped the Mongol occupation of his hometown, met the Ilkhan twice, and spent time with his commanders and ministers, during their stay in Syria. While Ibn Taymiyya was often at odds with the Mamlūk regime, at this junction he presented them with a full justification to conduct *jihād* against the allegedly-Muslim Ilkhans, claiming that the Mongols were not "real" or good-enough Muslims. This was due their preservation of their pre-conversion political culture, notably treating Chinggis Khan as a law-giver prophet, employing state law (*Yasa*) side by side with the *sharī'a*, and favoring religious pluralism. Moreover, they also collaborated with Christians, renegade Mamlūks (whom he saw as apostates) and Shī'īs. Aigle convincingly shows that the most elaborated *fatwā* of the three was written a bit later, after the conversion of Ghāzān's successor,

Öljeitü (r. 1305-1316), to Shī'ism and his attempt to control the sacred cities of Ḥijāz. Ibn Taymiyya saw this as a great danger to Sunnī Islam and indeed condemns Shī'ism in the same terms with which he argues against Chinggis Khan's special position in the Ilkhanate.

The book concludes with an epilogue reviewing the afterlife of Chinggis Khan and Tamerlane up to the present day.

The volume is well manufactured, although not devoid of typos, often related to East Asian terms. Thus the Tanguts, a people that flourished in north-west China before the Mongol conquest, never inhabited Siberia (p. 98); the first emperor of China was Qin Shi Huangdi, not as transcribed in p. 130; and the Daoist patriarch summoned by Chinggis Khan was Changchun or Qiu Chuji (1148-1227) not Ch'ui Ch'ui as in p. 152. Such quibbles aside, however, and despite a certain feeling of *déjà vu* while reading some of the chapters, this is a solid and insightful volume. It will be highly relevant to anybody interested in the Mongols in the Islamic lands and their relations with their neighbors, Mongol political culture, Mamlūk and Ilkhanid historiography, as well as the blurred borders between history, memory and myth.

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