

How the Dead Mattered in Ilkhanid Iran? The Local and the Global in Rashid al-Din's Three Refutations of Reincarnation

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The Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din's "Life and Teachings of the Buddha" in the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* is regarded as the best-informed medieval Muslim account of Buddhism and a prime example of inter-ecumenical writing during the period of Mongol rule. The influx of an eclectic body of Buddhist specialists from across Asia opened new vistas for inter-Asian interaction and cross-cultural exchange in Ilkhanid Iran. Yet, in spite of the ample attention that the vizier's account on the Buddha has received, it has been poorly noted that Rashid al-Din chose to end his seemingly favorable description of the Dharma with one of his three refutations of reincarnation, where the vizier vehemently rejects the Buddhist belief in the transmigration of souls. This paper considers Rashid al-Din's three refutations as inseparable from the vizier's writings on the Dharma. It does so by considering the social and political context of the vizier's anti-Buddhist polemics, considering both the larger receptivity for the Buddhist belief in reincarnation among the Mongol elites across Asia, and in light of the specific religious and cultural changes in the Ilkhanid court in Iran. I further suggest we consider Rashid al-Din's refutations at the intersection of two "debating cultures": The Mongol institution of the court debate and the Islamic traditions of inter-religious debates and polemics, especially as expressed through the field of Muslim theology (*kalam*). In his refutations and more broadly in his theological writings, the vizier uses the latter to merge the former, Mongol court institution into Islam, presenting his Mongol patron Öljeitü as a divinely inspired representative of rational theology.